

GAYS OF OUR LIVES

Life of Ryan — the continuing saga

Episode I

Traffic is hot. From out of its stream a blue 65 Thunderbird skidstops on the gravel. Its top is down.

"I'm going to 185th."

Dark hair balding from the front. Forehead and smile gleam.

"That's fine." You put your hand on the latch. Consider it. Then switch intensity onto the driver. "Hey! Can I jump in? I've always wanted to."

"Your shoes clean?"

You look. Spotted, but qualifiably white. The upholstery's blue anyway.

"Yeah."

"Go ahead then."

Leaping, arm braced on the door, eyes snag with a blond passenger in a passing red Camaro traveling only those few slow feet you swivel — nothing but eyes supporting you — and settle into the interior.

"OK?"

Black eyebrows — sharp peaked.

"Excellent. A dream has been realized."

His hand tightens on the shift, squeezes gears into motion. The Camaro is out of sight.

"Glad I provided the right setting." The shift rattles at cruising speed. His hand returns to it. "You looked fine vaulting in like that. Hand-some stunt."

You poke your fingers into the windstream. Twiddle them. "Do we have to talk about this?"

"Have we yet?" His smile flattens — eyes flicking from road to mirror — then flares out again. "Something else you'd rather talk about?"

"Hey, I appreciate the ride."

"See; you do want to talk about it." He taps the wheel. "I mean; personally I'm not above helping out the laws of chance, but have I laid in wait outside where I drop you off? Or asked the guard your name? Come on — how many more mornings are we going to pretend we just happen to meet? If we can manage screeching toward death in a little box at 60 mph there's got to be something else we can do together; even if it's not as much fun."

You take your hand out of the airstream. Stick it across the space between.

"Dave Ryan."

The stickshift rattles as his hand shoots to yours.

"Mark Jaidon. Doing anything tonight?"

"Petri dishes, I think." His hand lingers. You shake it again, laugh, and disengage. "Since I told them 'No more cages.' I've been promoted: sputum cultures and blood samples."

"S'that means you're busy." He sweeps the car to the right hand lane. "Because if you're thinking about it you've got two miles to go." He brakes to the top of the ramp. Looks both ways. At you. "Want I should go slow? I can



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milk it for 6 minutes."

"Go fast. I want to feel the wind." You lean elbow and chin over the door. "Besides, we already shook hands."

"I always suspected," Mark says solemnly, putting the car in gear, "there was a secret thrill to being a Mason."

You look. Mark is addressing his fingers on the wheel. Turning it.

"Secret gateways to the soul," he confides, pumping gas, reaching down for a gear.

"Exactly what are you talking about?"

White blooms along the fingers of his shift hand. A whine grows in the transmission.

"Exactly what am I talking about?" Tardily punching in the next gear. "Well, unless I'm making a mistake I haven't since I was eighteen, I think I'm saying I'm pleased to meet you — Look at the heron!"

From tall bottom grass of the right hand field, the bird lofts. Regally ungainly it proceeds directly in front of the car — legs and wingtips suddenly in reach overhead — parallels the duck-ridden surface of a housing development's artificial lake and, curvingly, ascends.

Releasing the back of the seat, twisting your neck to get out the kink of watching behind, your hand strikes Mark's shoulder hard.

The car slows suddenly.

"Mistake . . . huh?" he whispers.

To steady against deceleration you grab his shoulder. Mark tenses, pulls the car completely off the road. Your hold tightens as the car jerks to a stop.

"No high speed fights, OK." His hands come palm up. "Peace. No offense meant."

Your fingers dig into the fabric of his shirt. Clench at muscle. "Do you have any idea exactly how big a mistake you've made!" You shake him once. Then, calmly, before fear replaces the shock in his face, you kiss him.

A car rockets by. Its horn blares.

You lean back. "Now it's all out of sequence." Mark's face is still shocked, but his eyes have warmed and his mouth looks wonderful. "We were supposed to have a date in between."

"Well. We'll just start over." He lifts your hand from his shoulder. Shakes it. "As long as we don't have to go through the coy part again. That's strict emotional hijack. You would not believe what was going through my head. My grandmother. She had a truly evil smile." A group of cars go by. He pulls out behind them. "She sat me down into a heavy contest after I got home from school one day and pinched her. We took turns. I kept pinching her arm and she pinched me here." Touching his neck. "Until I was bawling. Trying to get in one last hard one and run away. But she held me in my chair and she always pinched back just as hard." A chain link fence begins its run along the road. Ahead is the turn-off to a guard booth fronted by a tarmac apron.

Mark pulls onto the apron and parks.

"And . . . ?" From the lines diving into his forehead and the wattage of his eyes he's trying to telepath something to you. "You opened her vein," you hazard, "and you've felt guilty ever since. Or she cut off the blood supply to your brain and left you as you are today."

"I kissed her," he says smugly and leans against the door. "I pinched lighter and lighter until we were both barely touching. Then I kissed her. And she kissed me. She died soon after."

"Snickering. 'Of course.' Toeing one tennis shoe with the other. Suddenly you leap from the car. 'But I'm your age and at least your match. You won't push me off the edge that easily,' — less melodramatically and much quieter — "innocent little boy. Call me after sunset. I'm in the book with the other evils. I make myself and maybe grandma, available

to you. Think about it." You force yourself still — watching him — so slender, and you — so uncomfortable.

"Ryan with a 'y'?"

You nod assent.

"Your paternal Grandmother?"

Unexpectedly, color fills out the space behind him; lozenges of wind brushed vegetation through the fence; the paling sky; the deeper blue and chrome studded car. You ball your hands into your pocket. He nods as if that were obvious assent. Puts the car in reverse and says seriously:

"I'll think about it."

And spins off.

You wake up to the guard booth. Stick your head in the open window and smile.

"I am very, very scientific this morning," you tell Kelly. "You may let me in. And you'd better switch to chocolate donuts. You've got powdered sugar all over your badge."

Kelly brushes at her left breast. Her fingers leave long white marks. "You're late." She pushes the button that opens the gate.

"I had a hard time getting a ride."

Kelly simply raises an eyebrow.

"He isn't a ride," you call over your shoulder, leaving the eyebrow behind. "He's the laws of Chance." The gate slides shut behind you. A patch of dandelions on the edging has gone ripe. You skip half a step and kick their fluffy heads off. Primly set beside them is the sign you pass every morning: Beaverton Simian Center . . . BSc . . . BS & C. Acres of enclosed semi-wilderness graced by concrete cubes without windows. Crows rattle and caw in the pines. Wonder what he'll think about it.

Through the East entrance and a detour through the Day room for coffee. Its smell mixes with chloroform as you walk past Surgery — is irredeemably fouled by whatever is being administered the chimps in 12A. You duck into 11A and grab a handful of the monkey's potato chips. They jump heavily about their cages and watch. They're being fed a diet rich in cottonseed oil to see if it makes them sterile. It's making them too fat to copulate. Science and you march forward across the corridor and open the door to 11B. "Morning Dr. A." You close the door. Sip coffee.

"Good morning David," Dr. Addison says. Cherub cheeks. Rounded glasses reflect fluorescents. "Before we begin today I need to ask you something seriously: have you ever considered the employment effects of kissing on a public roadside?" Her hair is loose today.

"No." You crunch a potato chip. "Is this a proposal?"

To be continued.

• 1984 Scott Swentek

Editor's note: The Life of Ryan; or Gays of our lives, the continuing saga, is appearing the first time in this issue. Scott Swentek is a prolific writer living in Portland. He grew up on the East Coast, went to college in Iowa, and arrived in Puddle City about five or six years ago.

The Life of Ryan will continue in these pages with every issue. Will they run out of monkey potato chips at the Beaverton Simian Center? Will Kelly get all the powdered sugar off her badge? Where will Chance take Ryan?

Don't miss an episode of The Life of Ryan; or Gays of our lives, the continuing saga, only in Just Out!