

GAYS OF OUR LIVES

Life of Ryan

Episode II

by Scott Swentek

The room is astonishingly loud for a Culture Lab, so you don't stop singing. "Get that Dave."

A tape recorder full of Keith Jarrett rollicks on the lab bench. An ultrasonic bath screams in the corner.

"Which that?"

A low pulsed hum compresses into buzzing.

"That, that." Plastic bonneted head bent close to a box's glassed window. Gloved hands moving among glass and green light inside.

"Oh."

You resume your cheery, modestly altered rendition of 'Attica State' and strangle the autoclave timer, check the pressure gauge and undog the door. A thick, damp roll of hot metal and culture medium steams down your front. Tardily, you reach for a labcoat. A bit of unexpected color snags your eye. The coat's left breast pocket presents a quiet anatomical drawing of a human heart vertically barred by a sliderule. A motto beneath: 'occurent nubes' (clouds will intervene). The right pocket, simply: 'Cheryl.'

"Have a wash-up too." Breath mists the glass. "What is it brings you to 'Addison State'?"

"Pleasure." You upend dripping hands over the sink, soaking your cuffs, and punch the blower knob with your elbow. Shouting over the hot air: "Travel for pleasure."

"The pleasure's in the departure. The 'State' itself is one of vast displeasure, usually Dr. Addison's. She believes in putting herself out for the occasion." Her hands withdraw from the manipulation gloves. She turns. Her lab coat pocket bears crossed drumsticks surmounted by a screaming baboon skull, roses blooming in eyesockets. Printed above: 'approaching extremes.' She turns further. "What's your sentence?" "david" announces the other pocket.

"I got a whole paragraph." Rolling up a cart, you begin unloading sterilized petri dishes from the autoclave. "That woman can really move my blood around." You maneuver the cart up next to Cheryl. "I've been banished for the afternoons."

"To Dr. Wiggant." Hands returning into gloves. "He's been very loud about having assistants quit on him. Dr. Addison would not scruple to kill two birds by throwing them at each other." She twists a valve in the box, knuckles a door from the inside; positive pressure gently pops it open. "Here." She pushes out a stack of inoculated plates, accepts a clean stack from the cart. "Mark them Sally 13AVS, drop them off and continue on to the library. Read everything relevant to Kaposi's Sarcoma that Dr. Wiggant has published and have a good long think. I'll cover for you here."

She looks up.

"And find a less personally revealing lab coat."

Your impeccably white coat sleeve rides down the tendons of your wrist as you knock below the office door nameplate. It crinkles uncomfortably in the hand of your elbow as you knock again. Shaking it back down, you walk the hall to the adjoining lab. A monkey is being annoyed inside at peak decibels. You

knock loudly and enter. A male voice rasps: "Stay still!" Hissing. "Clot."

A saintly, white-haired man in a dirty lab coat is attempting to force a screaming rhesus monkey into restraints. Underneath the battle a white cloth is flecked with blood and excrement. Monkeys caged around the lab shriek sympathetic. At the edge of the table a syringe rolls with the fight, daring its needle to the void. You secure the syringe and lean over the fray. The saintly, white-fringed head butts you away.

"Gloves if you're going to help." He jerks his head, concentrating on squirming muscles with teeth. "Over there. The thick ones."

Clumsy in leather, you help buckle down all flailing parts. Noticing how protective the monk is of one limb, you probe gently. Under the skin of the arm, near a puncture mark, blood pools.

"One of us moved," Dr. Wiggant explains.

"I don't like restraint as a general rule. It frightens them." He swabs at the other arm, selects a new syringe and, carefully, draws blood. The monkey shudders. He sets about unbuckling it. "I see you're trained in basic animal care. Here you must be very cautious. It is dangerous to have these monkeys bite you." He lifts and cradles the clinging animal.

"There is something in their body fluids which should not contact your own." Opening a group cage he allows the monkey to leap inside among feeding, fighting and copulating. He surveys the smaller cages; single occupants who move slowly, or not at all. "I must instruct you in autopsy. There is too much for me to do. I feel like an old man. We will have tea and talk in a moment, but now I will show you what to do." He turns baggy eyes to you, alive under glasses. His hand rests on a cage latch. "You do talk do you?"

"They're all male." Unedited words.

Momentarily you regard your tennis shoes; look up. "Sir."

Dr. Wiggant peers over his glasses; straightens. "I see there is no keeping secrets from you, Mr. Ryan. Quiet and observant are very nasty traits." He smiles. "Which I happen to appreciate. Please be so good as to demonstrate them." He places a young monkey in your arms. "Take 3 ccs from this young boy. No restraint."

You look into the warm, round eyes. Stroke soft fur.

"Yessir."

Inside, the car is a redolent plastic oven. You wait until you're careening down Sunset Highway, breasting rush traffic with both windows open before you start it.

"There's a scientist back there," you announce.

Cheryl's eyes flick automatic to the rearview mirror; to you. "Almost 200 people work back there," she says, signaling for the fast lane. "You were bound to meet Wiggant sometime."

"He was in his lab — working — when I got there." You bend forward, air flows between your prickling back and the seat. "We talked

right there and he showed me things, explaining why they're one way and not another. Then he didn't vanish into his office. He really cares that things are done right. For the first time I'm not bored dry."

"But you didn't invite him to the barbecue," Cheryl states, zooming by an incredible tangle of underpasses. "He's God already." Leaning her elbow out the window alters the airstream. Her fine hair blows.

"Don't make a hero trip out of it." Your shirt is damp when you settle back. "I don't know him well enough. He'd be too busy to come anyway."

"As I said." Accelerating around a sluggish Impala. "He'll topple eventually."

"Cheryl, I like the old guy."

"Then you be careful you know what you're doing." The slopes of Southwest Canyon rise in dusty summer green. "You're more likely to be contaminated by him than by the monkeys. You've got purpose and music. Don't stretch after more."

Riding through a crack in the concrete of Portland, towers grow as embankment walls run into the ground — then diminish as you ascend the foot of the Fremont Bridge. The aerial view of river's curve gives way to scrubby anywhere-ness of Scotch Broom, tarmac and overpasses.

"I don't think I want to be that narrow. It never looks good in other people." The wind drops as the car takes Delta Park exit. "I've got time."

"Only so much. You can't get any more." Tacked to saplings along the access road are paper plates sporting flocks of multicolored arrows. '2nd Annual Non-Sectarian Blitz,' reads a banner siding a parking lot. She stops; engine running. "Unless you're one of the lucky ones you'll have to decide what single thing you want most."

You grin. "Karl."

All the serious lines vanish. She laughs. "By all means. Keep him. I'm done wasting my time on him." Sobering. "I've got to get home, get Brian and get ready. You can manage?"

"Yeah." You rattle fingers in rolling synco-pation on the dash; open the door. "I'll manage fine." Slip outside, stick your head back in. "Wear the Hawaiian dress, ok? I can watch you dance."

"Womanizer." She pulls out, the car door shuts under your hand.

"Yeah." Close by a blond woman in a polka dot summer dress bends into the rear of a familiar Ford station wagon. You sprint over and grab her from behind. She shrieks, squirming around in your arms.

"David!" Hugging back. "And early!"

"I paid out for a quick ride." Bringing hands back around you gently cup her breasts. "Still sore, Trace?"

"They're just fine, Honey. But with the dues I've been paying lately I could buy my way off the fence and leave the nagging reminder dangling. Either that or back to severe business suits." Meditatively, Trace hoists two bags of ice from the car. "There's no cheers for sailors under false colors."

"May I help with the ice, pretty lady?"

"Oh, sure," she says abstractedly, moving off. "I'm working the Pump Bar with the girls."

Hefting four blessedly cold bags of cocktail ice you stagger into a sunburnt field. Tables and booths rear in all stages of preparation. The unpeopled stage cluttered with equipment boxes and unassembled electronics. Your drum set half-unpacked by some sweetheart.

You dump the ice under an awning by a row of keg distended plastic buckets and draw a beer. Charlie is talking with Trace and five or six other humans. There's sweat down her sides and patches where nipples stretch the sleeveless khaki t-shirt. For the occasion her crewcut is red with white sidewalls. Her green eyes catch you — a wink — and return to business. The mastermind of the Blitz.

One-handedly removing your shirt and juggling your beer, you climb onstage, sit on your stool, kick off your tennis shoes and peel down the socks with your toes. Closing your eyes for the sensation, the day rolls by in the dark. Interesting and unpredictable. Maybe he would have come. Blinking, making sure there's no one around, you skin out of your jeans, reach into the bass drum for your red bikini briefs and pull them on.

"Nice show."

You smile at the voice. Tilt your head back against his thighs and look up all skinny six feet to the black wavy hair of Karl O'Halloran.

"I was thinking."

"Of me?" His little finger delicately enters your ear. You shiver involuntarily and close your eyes again.

"Nah. Someone older." The sun feels good on bare flesh. "I'm working with this guy studying Simian AIDS. He really digs into it and I've..."

The finger disappears from your ear. Behind your head, thighs stiffen. You open your eyes onto is.

"Something wrong?" you ask.

End Episode II

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