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GAYS OF OUR LIVES

Life of Ryan

Episode IV

by Scott Swentek

A brilliant resounding note razors the crowd. Reaps their attention and recedes with it as another note knives sharp-edged; humming embedded in the senses. Onstage the withered old man raises his mallet. The sun bleeds its chroma in skeins before him. He taps as the sun touches the hills and a last, whole, note sings from the glass. Growing from this final beat into rapid clusters of notes — glass and pearl and crystal — so single and judicious the bright eyes that select them, the thin hand that measures them against the setting sun; its light striking the prisms hung vibrating at the end of an electronic web pure amplified and paced by a brain so familiar with sunsets and time that the last intolerable bit of gold vanishes into the last note and sunset runs bloody through the humming prisms of the glass harmonium. The old Dane nods to applause, locking secure the swing of crystals with a padded bar. Rising to relinquish, slowly, the stage.

You grip his hand as he descends the stair. Smile tight and helpless; grasping him even when he is secure on the grass. He nods smiling and pats your arm. You release him. He sways; stopping himself with a hand to your naked hip. He pats that too. Smiles again and moves off. No English.

People mill about on the unlit stage setting up their own instruments in the absence of a crew. The second set is intended to be Rock by eight people who've never practiced together. Whether it will be music is problematic. The Blitz Blow-Out Band has a horn section — two tubas and a trumpet. Charlie has promised the tubas will save themselves for the final set of the evening. You settle among your drums thinking about human history and promises, check the snare release and, when you lift your head from the drum, Karl is there plugging in his Stratocaster. He bends, tuning in painfully obvious absorption, over the unamplified strings and, with this mutual failure to acknowledge, another promise breaches.

He steps forward. Nods to the darkening meadow and light explodes around you. With the first chord you're smashing into your kit. Kicking and reaching past tempo. Forcing the beat. The rest of the band follows sluggishly. Karl glares at you . . . then you hit it.

Sweaty skin encases coolness on a hot night. Drops flying slow from your arms gleam red, yellow and green in gelled light. The floodlit crowded meadow beyond your threshing limbs resolves to distant individual dramas. All silent. In a sole folding chair close by the stage sits the old Dane, leaning to hear. The broad, blond son stands behind, wincing. Wishing the old man had stayed in the Old Country, had less annoying pastimes, had not come as living reminder of better glassworkers. His hand rises, grips the old



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artisan on the shoulder near the throat. A small child pulls apart a cloud of cotton candy; his arms vanished in fluffy pink. Face in dismay, Cheryl squats beside him, unraveling him, leaving the conversation of a young couple to the women tending beer pumps. The young man has a coarse red face and laughs as the woman he talks to bends over the beer counter offering Cheryl beer and napkins to wash her child. The woman he is with turns at his laugh. She shares his narrow waist/broad shoulders — Kelly, the day guard where you work. The redheaded woman behind the counter reaches to her, drawing back her attention, hand lingering. The young man lifts his paper cup, throat working up and down; draining.

. . . then you come down from it. And it's like it usually is. And the music stops. And you're tired.

Stage lights dim. Hunched over examining your kickpedal you ignore band members muttering by; hear Karl's boots stamp angry behind and past. Neither of you will talk. When you look up, Chloe stands centerstage silent among drums brought from Southern Earth — her flesh and her drums same colored under low spotlight. You freeze behind your bass drum; onstage past your time. Watch her arms rise in wing curves, trailing hands across drumheads sandy whispering, mouthing gravel as palms press circling stutter on taut parchment. A quick hand pops a high note off a tiny drum on a stand. Gravel rolls into boulders — the little drum popping bones between — all tumbling from arms weaving polyrhythm. Darting to draw a drum's voice. Coaxing one gradually from

distance into the moving pattern before her. Shouts from the crowd mark human rhythm wave of jut head to hip jerk tongue flipping at each bounce. Encouraging, encouraging. Then withers the fullness of expression. Space gaps between notes as hands withdraw. Sad questions arise in slow beating hollows. Shouts die to waiting. Silence looms massive beyond the two slowing hands in their tiny puddles of sound. Light dims.

A note floats clear into tops of skulls, draws sweet breath from the crowd. The drums question it. Another falls. The drums rise to enfold it, then flowers in a shower of crystalline notes. A spotlight leaps and shatters on the trembling bars of the old Dane's music; fingers deft and quick as Chloe's striking arms. They seem to sing, calling to each other. And you are on your stool announcing yourself, joyfully riding in on the ringing of your cymbal. A solo for three. Your drums interlocking with Chloe. Snare and cymbals bridging to the notes of glass. Lights up and faces lifted around you. Music nerves mesh across stage. Agree. Contract. Conclude.

Raising sticks high into the cheering, you smile; turning to your partners who dazzle back at you. Friends call from the edge of the stage. You stretch for your towel — dripping with sweat. A red face, not laughing now, leans an arm over the stage, still clutching a beer cup. Challenging, belligerent.

"You're gay, right?"

He seems disconcerted by the laughing you can't stop.

end of episode IV