

GAYS OF OUR LIVES

Life of Ryan

by Scott Swentek

Episode V

"Hey! What's the matter? I didn't tell a joke, I asked a question." He settles his arms more comfortably on the jerry-built stage; leans on them. "You're gay, right?" Sips his beer.

Your laughter has long since gone to a cold place. "I haven't the slightest interest in you," methodically you wipe down your legs, "your assumptions," throw the towel inside your bass drum, "or any statements you think are questions." You stand. "Blow."

"I figure anyone at this bash is likely to be queer. Specially if they're on stage. So I asked the freak slinging beer dressed like a woman about you." He gulps his beer; crumples the cup and tosses it. Stagelights enhance the red in his damp face. "I got a problem my sister says you can help me out with."

You turn at that. Plant your feet wide. "With the balls that run in your family I'm surprised you have a sister at all. Unless she's just a figment you blame your stupid opinions on." You keep your hands still by jamming the knuckles into your hips. Bend close to the face near your feet. "Who and what I am or anyone else is is no business of yours even if it is and you're paid for it. If I'm onstage I'm a performer. If I'm tending bar I'm a god-damned bartender and what I am in bed isn't printed on the ticket or part of admission here no matter who tells you otherwise. If people here have anything in common at all it's low tolerance for bigotry. Say what you want freely, just like anyone else, but I've got my gut reactions too and you'd better not spew yours with your face so close to my feet."

Backing off. "There's no reason to talk like that. I don't hate fags." He smiles. "Hell. My sister's a dyke."

"Hi, Dave." Kelly's dark-haired head bobs up beside stage. "Have you met my brother, Al?" Cheerful out of her uniform.

"Great music, Dave." Charlie's red hair flames in stagelight as she comes up beside Kelly. "Your help made it a solo worth noting." She rubs Kelly's hip in passing; climbs the steps between her and her brother. "Only solo on record with three performers." She nudges you. "Clear off. I've got announcements to make. Kelly, take care of him."

"She already has." Your tone draws a passing sidelong look from Charlie; greeneyed flash.

"See Ryan," draws the dark-haired man — Al. "I told you I had a sister."

You ignore him. "I'm dry. I need a drink." Smile vaguely at Kelly. "I'll see you later. Maybe at work."

Some bright word of hers falls incoherent behind you as you jump offstage and jog through the summer crowd across trampled, littered grass. It was hotter onstage. Bulbs and paper lanterns fight off night. Whirring insects cloud the light over the beer table. Trace sees you coming and draws a beer. It's

on the table when you step up, and then at your mouth. Her summer dress has slipped over one strong, freckled shoulder.

"A man was here asking for you," she says, plucking at her shoulder.

You tilt the cup from you, leave its lip touching yours. "We met. Exactly what did you tell him about me?"

"Just that you were onstage. It was too busy to stop and gossip." She hands two beers across the table, accepting a bill from one male of a pair. Smiles them off. "You're getting more discerning nowadays, Honey." She tilts both a penciled eyebrow and a lacquered smile at you. "He's a sight handsomer than your usual."

"Trace, girl, there is obviously something wrong with you." You intercept a fresh beer. Nod to the discommoded customer and walk off.

"My hormones come from the best clinic in Lake Oswego," she calls.

"Synthetic, you shout to the sky."

"Am not."

People around you laugh and you feel no better. Walking beyond the lights and the meadow and the crowd you step delicately barefoot onto a trail you know from daylight. Charlie's amplified voice muffles behind leaves. It is too much, sometimes, to be expected to charge from one moment directly into the next. The parking lot lights glow ahead much too soon. The trail widens into a dark alcove and you smell dope.

"I'd like some of that," you tell the orange spark in the shadow.

"There's not much left," says the shadow.

"That'll do."

"What I mean." The shadow rustles to one side. "Is that I can light another. Sit down."

Groping, you find the log. Its bark rasps your bare thighs as you sit.

"Here."

Your searching hand strikes an arm in front of you, slides down over wrist to fingers and the dry upright of a joint. You pluck it and the hand follows it to your mouth — creates a warm space catching your breath. A hand comes from beneath, making a floor. The clickcatch flame of the lighter dazzles. The deep crease of the head line crosses the cupping palm from edge to edge. Heat and light click away. You deeply inhale smoke.

"I heard you play with two others. It transported me."

"Thanks." Exhaling. "And thanks." You jitter the orange tipped drug in the darkness between you.

"Keep it."

"And again, thanks." Inhaling.

"Who was the old man playing the glass chimes? And the dark girl who played drums so well?"

Exhaling. "Not to be rude but," carefully, "who do you think they are?"

"The old man? Northern European. Religious and a bit mischievous. An old Norse god hammering music out of icicles. An artisan basically. The girl strikes me as more serious. As if she studied her music intensely and really doesn't know her own pain which makes it beauty. Definitely American."

"That is so much better than the last review I heard. So much better." You throw back your head; blink at the stars. "You've really gotten down into Chloe. She's bummed her

way into every crack of the world with a drumbeat in it. And she's righteous. I think the old Dane's a mystic. I know his son's some kind of religion that clashes. They've gotten together again just this summer. They're glassworkers. It was supposed to be Chloe's solo, but when he joined in, there was a part missing I had to fill in. I just kind of seemed to be there." Timid. "What about me?"

"You? American."

Startled. "Thanks." Your ears expected more to lean on. "Is that all?"

"It's enough now. There'll be time for more."

You shiver. "I need some clothes." Jump up. "And a ride to where I can hitchhike."

"I've got a car." The shadow rises.

"Great." Starting off. "Through the parking lot is closer."

People have been drifting about the lot all throughout your smoke. A van parked at the edge of the woods has its door open to you. With dark accustomed eyes the light through the windshield resolves the movement inside into two bodies. It's Karl's van, and inside your lover moves hands and mouth on the body of Al, the guy with problems.

Squirting from behind you into the light, the shadow becomes a fine knit man. He slaps the rear fender of a blue 65 Thunderbird. Its top is down. "Hop in when you're ready. You remember how." He turns. The quick smile fades. Light gleams from his high forehead. "You alright, David?"

"No." Stillborn. "I'm dead."

end Episode V

