

GAYS OF OUR LIVES

Life of Ryan

Episode VI

by Scott Swentek

Crumpled among the blankets that so much earlier cushioned your drums, hands and white lozenges of flesh shift

from dark fabric into lights dimly and irregularly piercing the interior of the van.

"Where have you been all weekend?" You let the lab door hiss shutclick behind you. Lean against it. "I..."
"I deduced you weren't being ransomed for your drums. You left those behind." Cheryl taps her lab stool with a wire-tipped glass rod. "And it couldn't have been for your clothes.

Those were in the drumcases. So which was it?" She pokes the wire into a bunsen burner flame. "Rape or murder?" A pop of steam as she plunges the red-glowing wire into a solution filled beaker. She considers the cold wire loop, turns back to inoculate Petri dishes with it. "Karl's been living with us since Saturday morning; in case you wondered why your apartment is half emptied. I'm kicking him out tomorrow. He doesn't seem to remember we're not married. Or maybe it's more primal."

"I haven't been home yet."

"From those clothes I could have guessed. What were you? Stolen by wood nymphs?" She puts down the loop; briefly rubs her temples. "David, we both know Karl is basically a jerk. Handsome, but a jerk. Why didn't you call?"

"Wood nymphs don't have phones."

"They have clothes, they have phones."

"Don't be middle-class." You push away from the door. "What happened to my drums?"

"The woman you performed with, Chloe, has your kit. She said she'd take care of them until the body turned up."

"How'd she and Charlie get along?" You pull up a stool.

"Not at all. And that is not the issue."

"You're not Charlie," you point out.

"Not by 50 pounds and a pint of henna, and that's still not the issue. What happened between you and my soon-to-be re-exed husband?"

Your hand clutches the van door. Oblivious inside, eyes crimped shut, absorbed in each other's bodies. Moving.

"What did he say happened?"

Cheryl toys with the inoculating loop, contaminating it again. "He said you were pissed simply because he didn't want to live with a leper. Not that it was personal, of course." She leans on her elbow, slides the loop into the flame. "He didn't want to bring any disease home from you to the bosom of his family. Delicately forgetting I work two steps away from the AIDS lab myself and see our child... oh, maybe a million times as often as he does."

Karl shudders, head dropping back, eyes jerking open. "Asshole," you say distinctly, slamming shut the van door. You step lightly across the gravel and jump into the open convertible Thunderbird. The driver pulls out of the parking lot.

"That's how it was." You stand. Begin studying the shelves of brown-bottled chemicals. "You got two years. I got six months. I'd say his staying power is declining."
"And it doesn't bother you?"
"You know Karl." Tossing a bottle in your hand. "Should it?"

"We don't have to."

"Shut up." Jerking belt from buckle. Tugging his shirt and trousers.

"Mind if I borrow this?" You display the bottle. "Dr. Wiggant's having a marathon staining party. I can pay you back tomorrow. I rush-ordered some."

Cheryl squints. Takes your wrist and moves the bottle closer. "Eosin." Pushes it away. "A whole bottle? I told you he was a real scientist. Take it. What's he staining anyway?"

"All sorts of disgusting things." You step to the door.

"Are you sure you're alright, David?"

You step halfway into the corridor. "Better, at least. Thanks Cheryl." Let the door close, walk down the corridor and out into the sunshine between your labs.

"I liked that," he says low into your ear. Rolls away onto the scattered bedding among everything else that followed you onto the floor. Stretches his arms towards the ceiling, raises his legs and grabs his toes. "I like you. I think I'd like both for a long, long time." He turns his face to you in this absurd posture, dark eyes grave under high forehead.

His head is bowed. Silky white hair spiked Bozo-Einstein. You enter the office noisily so his eye doesn't startle against the microscope. He lifts his head.

"You found some, good." He eases a crick from his back. Stands and takes the bottle from you, sketching a gesture. "Have a look." He steps to the sink as you sit down.

A profusion of glass microscope slides are heaped on white paper to your right, purple liquid squashed in their middles, the glass green where cockeyed thinnesses overlap. To the left, with far more acceptable technique, five slides line up, names of monkeys neatly wax penciled on each. You bend, pressing the side of your nose against the eyepiece, looking through.

"What am I looking for?" You adjust the focus.

"Abnormal cells."

In a pink world hang pinker globes, most singular, some endlessly segmented. "Raspberries?" you call.

"The first result of Simian AIDS infection. I expect the electron microscope plates will show the causative agent."

You blink up from the microscope. "You've isolated it?"

"I believe so." He taps powder into a flask of liquid. "After we publish our results we will begin to find the cure." He looks half at you, half at the red solution in the flask. "Your name will be on the research paper."

"But... thanks." You fidget for a second. Tap the five slides out of, then into line, read the names. "I'd better isolate these monks, they're infected, aren't they?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." He stands by you, swirling the flask. "As is this one." He takes the slide off the microscope stage. Checks its tagged number against a propped labbook.

You roll and rise, lowering on him so that his arms and legs are caught folded between you. His smile flashes briefly into and out of existence.

"A long, long time," he repeats.

"How long were you planning on Jaidon." Pressuring against him.

"I don't know, Ryan." He moves under you. "How long have you got?"

Dr. Wiggant frowns at the labbook. "It appears to be my own." Carefully he sets down the slide, then looks at you, expression unchanged. "Perhaps we'd best have a look at yours, too."

end episode VI

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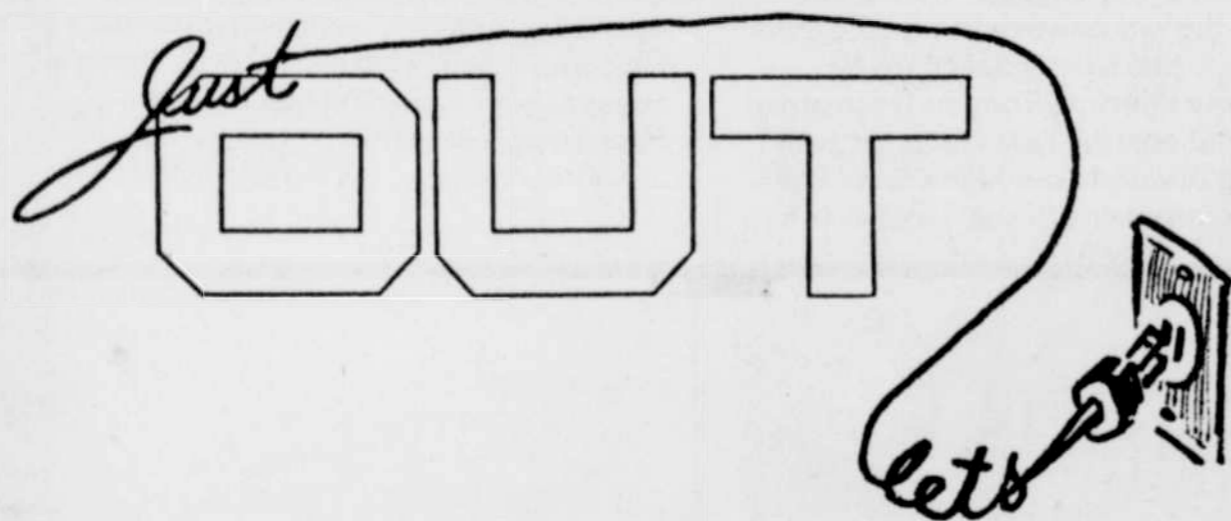
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