

The Life of Ryan

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I am a female in my mid 30's, single with no children. From what I have come to understand about today's society - most of my knowledge admittedly gained from *Must See TV* - it is perfectly acceptable to be me and there are plenty of others like me. I am a woman free to make my own decisions without compromise. If I want to eat a pork chop, a bag of bite-sized Twizzlers and a lemon flavored Luna bar for dinner, I do. If what I eat makes me gassy, my cat may choose to leave the room, but she will never tell. I decided a long time ago and without any outside influences that no piece of furniture in my house would be black, gray or chrome. Nothing would light up, flash, make synthesized noises or spin around by remote control.

I read. I exercise. I attend cultural activities and social gatherings. I have friends, a positive relationship with my Mother. Life is pretty good. Yet sometimes, for no apparent reason, people I hardly know pat me on the shoulder sympathetically and say, "Eventually everything will turn out okay."

In Boise, Idaho, it is not really okay to be me. Maybe I could get away with my kind of behavior in New York or Los Angeles, but *here* I am a freak of nature with no concept of my own dysfunction. I am out of touch and others feel compelled to remind me how miserable I really am.

Those people on television, they tell me, they're just pretending to be single in order to

keep the storyline going - they're actors, you see. In real life they're happily married, with kids and a Golden Retriever. You, Charmagne, you're the only one, they say. You and, oh yes, there is this friend of mine. You should meet him.

I am a magnet for unsolicited advice - what to eat, how to drive, who to date, when to date, why I should be dating more often. Last week I was plugging along just fine on my own merits. This week I get a call from a business associate who attempts to convince me that I am unhappy and that all of my problems could be solved if only I would "get out more" and meet his friend Craig.

"You'll like him," he says. "You guys have a lot in common. You both like to fish and hunt." I immediately picture a man wearing an orange baseball cap. His red and black flannel is tucked in low under his huge gut. He puts the gun down long enough to shake my hand, wink, and flash me a yellow grin.

"I don't hunt," I say.

I do, however, like to fish. My stepfather gave me his old fishing pole and to my surprise, I caught a fish, then another and another, in the pond near my house. At the river I caught a 20-inch trout. I brought it home and laid it alongside a measuring tape in my sink. I took pictures of it. Then I bragged about it to every guy I knew, including this particular business associate. I am thinking now that I may have given him the wrong impression of me. Truth be told, the fish I caught didn't put up much of a fight (I think it was sick).

"No, not hunt," he says. "Camp. I mean, you both like to fish and to camp."

"Hm."

"It can't hurt. Let him take you to dinner or something."

"I don't know."

"C'mon. What else do you have to do? Go home to your cat?"

This hurts my feelings. My life, which seemed pretty good a few minutes ago, suddenly sounds pathetic through the eyes of someone else. I flash to the lemon Luna bar, the Twizzlers, my cat leaving the room. If I start defending myself now I will sound pathetic. *I like going home to my cat. I am happy with my cat.* No one believes me. And at this moment I am not sure that I believe me.

Two days later I get a call from Craig. He sounds a little like Yogi Bear over the phone, only not quite as clever, and excessively loud. I convince myself that it's the phone connection. Before he says anything else, he asks me if I would like to go to dinner sometime.

"Sure," I say. (*Why the hell not?* I think as I grab beer number two from the fridge and kick the cat off my leg.)

"Dan tells me that you're a real nice lady," he says.

To me, a lady is someone who wears an ankle-length dress with puffy sleeves and a square flap of lace across her chest. A lady is someone who cuts her hair in a bi-level and gets up early every Sunday for church. I think he's got the wrong idea about me. I'm no lady.

He is still talking. He is talking about fishing now. He is telling me a story about a place where he likes to fish. I am holding the phone away from my ear and I can make out every word he says perfectly. He is giving me directions - highways, names of towns. He says the word, "man" a lot. "Man, you gotta love it," he says. "I just can't get enough of it. Man alive."

I wonder how he knows for sure that I am still on the line. I try to say something, but he talks over me. He tells me how great it is to meet someone who has the same love for fishing that he does. I take another drink.

“Most of the time I just go fishing by myself,” he says, “unless I take someone else with me.”

I laugh.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Is there a Sizzler downtown?” he asks. “Man, I grew up all my life in Boise and I still get lost. I don’t go downtown too much. Man alive, it’s getting so I don’t even recognize where I am anymore. I’ll be driving down the street and I’ll just get lost and I’ll think ‘where the heck am I?’ Man oh man alive. So do you like Mexican?”

“Well - ”

“There’s a Mexican place in Meridian. Or Seafood, maybe. Man, I sure do like fish. I’m what you’d call a fishaholic.” He laughs. “There’s a nice little seafood place over there by the mall somewhere. Now what’s that place called?”

I think for a minute. “Red Lobster?”

“No. Where’s that?”

“By the mall.”

“No, it’s over on Cole and Fairview. Man, what’s that place called?”

Cole and Fairview. Cole and Fairview. I picture the Rite Aid, but I can’t think of a

restaurant.

"It's right on Fairview there on the corner...Maybe it's Curtis. Man, I forget."

On Fairview? No. He couldn't be thinking of...

"Skipper's?" I ask.

"Yeah! That's it. Man, I always forget the name of that place. They got some pretty good seafood there. You want to go there?"

"Isn't that...um...a fast food chain?"

"Is it? Man, I don't know nothing about restaurants."

I can tell right away that Craig is not *the one*. This, of course, would be the perfect opportunity to call it off - tell him, *no thanks*, and have another beer with my cat. Or I could take advantage and insist on a really *nice* restaurant - get a free meal out of this.

I do neither. Instead, caught in the moment that is now Craig, I think to myself, *Where would a guy like this like to eat? Where would he feel comfortable?* I do this because I'm afraid that if I call it off now, he won't like me. Everyone must like me. This pattern of thinking is so automatic that words come out of my mouth without my conscious knowledge. "What about The Golden Corral?" I ask.

"Oh Yeah, I love that place. Man, that's a great idea! We think alike! They got a whole smorgasbord there..."

The next day I desperately want to call the whole thing off. I email Dan to let him know how I feel.

I write:

Craig seems like a very nice guy, but I don't really think I feel like dating anyone right now. (He wanted to take me to dinner at Skipper's). Can I please have his phone number so I can cancel the date? I just don't see that this is going work out. I am not very good at this sort of thing. Sorry if I let you down.

He writes back:

Don't worry so much! Craig's not very good at the dating thing either. He's been single for a long time, just like you. Don't make unrealistic expectations. Take it slow. You guys will be fine.

We agreed that he would pick me up at 7:00. It is 6:35 and I pop the cap off my second beer. When did I start drinking so much? I check myself in the mirror. Yes, there is a reflection. I don't look at myself up close. I have no desire to make any improvements, even though there is probably a lot of work that could be done.

I walk to the window and I see a confused looking man drive by very slowly in a big pick-up truck. His window is open and he is hanging out of it. I can see his lips move as he reads the address on my house out loud. He doesn't see me even though I am right in front of him, about 20 feet from his face. I take another drink thinking, if I were him, I would drive around the neighborhood for a while until it is closer to 7:00.

He stops his truck. I frantically search my purse for gum.

"Sorry I'm so early," he yells as he steps inside and I step out. He is the loudest person I have ever met. He is wearing a white polo shirt, black, pleated, dress pants and clean-as-a-

whistle, white tennis shoes. His hair is parted in the middle and prematurely gray. The top of his head reminds me of the worn down toothbrush I use to clean around the sink. I have a strange desire to touch it to see if it feels the same way.

We walk to his truck. He decides at this point that he is going to call me “kid” for the rest of the evening, even though we are the same age. He does not open the door for me.

“You better slam that door hard, kid,” he says as we climb in. “There’s something wrong with it - wouldn’t want it to swing open while we’re in motion.”

When he turns on the engine the blare from the radio startles me so much that I jump in my seat and say, “Jesus,” with my hand on my chest. He is oblivious. Instead of turning it down, he yells over it.

“Yeah, kid, The Golden Corral. That’s good eating.”

I find myself staring at the volume knob, squinting, unable to move. It is quite possible, I think, that I am having a seizure. If I could just...lift...up...my...hand.

Craig uses a lot of gestures as he talks. Although I continue to stare at the volume knob, I can see his arm in my peripheral vision. It is flailing around in the air, getting closer and closer to my face. He is talking about his brother. Apparently, his brother has a lot of children and is envious of Craig because Craig can go fishing or hunting whenever he wants.

In mid-sentence he flings his hand out and accidentally flicks me under the eye with his finger. He isn’t aware of it and continues right on talking. The finger-flick knocks me out of my trance, but as hard as I try, I can’t stop squinting.

“Yeah, kid,” he yells. “My brother thinks I live *The Life of Ryan*.”

“The life of who?” My lips move and I can feel the vibration at the back of my throat, but there is no sound coming out.

“What?” he asks.

“Who’s Ryan?” I yell.

“*The Life of Ryan*. It’s a saying, kid. Haven’t you heard that before?”

“No.”

“Really?”

It sounds familiar, but I think he’s got it wrong. “Where does it come from?” I ask.

“What?”

“What’s its origin? Who’s Ryan?”

“There is no Ryan, kid. It’s just a saying.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means, I don’t know, like, ‘the good life.’”

“Hm.”

We arrive at the Golden Corral and we are immediately herded into the main gate, through a maze of fences leading to the cash register. The place is crowded with broad shouldered, middle-aged women in faded purple and green tank tops, and men that openly display their butt cracks. I think to myself that it wouldn’t seem out of place if spotted cow dogs nipped at our ankles to make us move faster in line.

“Don’t worry about it, kid. I’ll get this one,” Craig says, holding up his hand as if to stop me from pulling a wad of cash out of my purse and insisting I cover the bill.

“Thanks.”

There are three main troughs at the Golden Corral. The center trough is the most popular. It contains fried and creamed vegetables, a grill with sirloin steaks (or “prime rib” if your Craig), four-hundred ways to serve chicken, and the beloved popcorn shrimp. The second most popular trough is the dessert trough (ice cream, banana pudding, peanut butter pie...). The least popular is the salad bar. Dark and alone it sits in the back corner, its broccoli wilted from neglect.

After finishing the food on my plate, the waiter removes it from the table in a frenzied blur of motion and replaces it with another one. This is dangerous. I find myself wondering if I had really eaten the fried okra. I remember that I *thought* I might try it. I can’t remember if I actually did. There is so much food, so much food. I eat and I eat but the plate in front of me is always clean. It frightens me.

Craig is unusually quiet during the meal. I think this might be the perfect opportunity to get him talking about something other than fishing.

“Do you like to watch movies?” I ask.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Man, I love movies. But I think they’re a waste of time.”

It occurs to me then, that I am still squinting.

“Did you see *The Green Mile*?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Man, that’s my favorite. I loved that movie. I cried and cried.” He uses both hands to show me what the tears looked like coming out of his eyes. In doing so, he touches his face,

leaving a dab of whipped cream on his cheek. "When that Tom Hanks says, 'How am I gonna explain this to God,' that just gets me every time."

"Hm." I wonder then if shooting a rifle over and over can cause someone to lose sensation in their finger tips.

"You know that part?"

"I don't remember."

"Did you see it?"

"Yes."

"You don't remember that part?"

"No."

"Man, that's the best part."

"Hm."

"You see, this black guy, the big guy, do you remember that guy? The one that was in jail?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's innocent, you see. There's these ginger twins that get killed and the townsfolk, they think he did it, but really, he's innocent..."

As he proceeds to tell me the entire plot of the movie that I have already seen, my mind continues to wander. I think back to a date that I had last summer. He looked like Keifer Southerland. We were taking a walk through the park on a rather hot evening and I felt like everything was going pretty well. I noticed a father and son flying a kite across a grassy field

nearby. I looked up at the kite with its brightly colored tail blowing in the breeze. The sky was a cool color of blue. I thought to myself how nice it would feel to have a breeze like that blowing on my face, through my hair.

“I wish I was a kite,” I said.

A kite. I told Kiefer Southerland that I wanted to be a kite. Craig and I may be on different teams, but we both suck at this game.

On the ride home he turns down the radio but continues to talk as loud as humanly possible. He pats me on the shoulder hard, laughs his cartoon laugh, and proceeds to tell me about a great money-making scheme he has. He plans to save up some cash in order to buy a charter fishing boat. Then he will round up some “pretty college girls” to work on the boat to serve beer and appetizers. He thinks this is a great idea because “old farts” like to fish and watch pretty college girls in bikinis. He asks what I think of his plan.

“I don’t like that plan at all,” I say.

As I shut my front door behind me, the silence of my home fills me with joy. Will and Grace is a rerun so I look up, “The Life of Ryan” on the web.

The *Life of Riley*, it reads, *origin unknown, possibly Irish. A life of blissful sloth.*

I grab my unfinished beer from the fridge along with half a bag of pumpkin seeds and I proceed to the lawn chair in my backyard. As I sit there, with the setting sun warming my face, I think about all the actors on television pretending to be single in order to keep the storyline going.

It's true. Whenever a character gets married or has a child on a sit-com, you can bet the show will be canceled the next season. "Happily ever after," that's where the show ends. I'm not so sure I want my show to end.

I spit out a pumpkin shell and it lands on the top of my bare foot, just below my middle toe. I look down at it as I take another drink.

A life of blissful sloth. Yes, I like that.