



## **The Project**

By Samantha Merrydew

*Read at Storytails on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2010*

I can still remember the moment when the girl shouted “fire!”

I can remember with great clarity the trembling, youthful shrill of her voice. The abstract moment of a potentially life-ending situation preventing itself was something I had never before encountered. And yet here it was.

Oddly, I must have spent a second, maybe two, reflecting on how the girl’s voice shouting that awful declaration reminded me of poetry time as a boy at play school, when we used to sing London’s Burning. The moment when, two lines into the poem, we children would sing “Fire, Fire!”

It must have been the youthfulness of the girl’s voice, I imagine. The frenzied panic that must have already snatched her heart had barely introduced itself to ours. We were all caught in a moment of delay; a pause of pre-emptive self denial. I didn’t want to look at Iris, my wife. If our eyes met something would be communicated that would ultimately confirm the impending horror of our situation. I could see her through the corner of my eye; her mouth slightly open in shock, her hand at the base of her neck, pushing fretfully into the skin on her chest. She always did that when she was upset, angry or afraid.

The smoke appeared. It curled around the door frame and seemed to cling to the walls, rising and flowing across the ceiling. The speed with which it entered and dominated the room was shocking. A dirty, caustic mist had developed in a matter of seconds.

People began to scramble towards the door in a desperate mass, much like sheep being rounded by the shepherd dog. They pushed into one another and used the weight of their bodies to try to lunge forward.

Iris had run towards me and pressed her face against my chest. I felt the vibration of her muffled screams against my rib cage, as my eyes began to sting insufferably against the toxic invasion of the smoke, and my lungs started to hack against the inside of my chest.

They say when people are presented with a life/death situation, their instinct for survival kicks in and they fight to stay alive. Or they freeze with fear or resignation, and go down with the ship.

Well, my ship was sinking fast and I seemed to possess no overriding composure to fight to save it. If there were any clear way of surmounting the intense danger I was in, it was obscured by the smoke and the panic and Iris's screams. She was still pushing her face against my chest as though trying to enter my body and disappear from the terror that had entered her life.

I loved Iris. My God, I truly loved her. At that devastating moment of chaos and fear, I felt the love I held for my wife swell within me with such intensity that I was lost within it. Had I not realised the extent of my affection and admiration for my wife sooner, you might ask? In a sense yes I had, but not wholly. I had a deep awareness of her, and understood her many layers, moods and ideas. But I had not maintained a full, open appreciation for her spirit, her beauty.

Her simple bird like features and those nervous hands that were always prodding, fiddling and rubbing against each another. Her hands were like two melancholy mavericks disguised as limbs. How restless they were!

Iris set them their very own tasks to keep them distracted and compliant: needlework and piano. What an extraordinary pianist she was, too. Though she was a terrible seamstress; bloody awful to be frank.

Were we dying yet? Had the fire caught up with its awful ally that came in the form of the thick, filthy smoke? No, it had not. Though the threat of its crackle could be heard from the hallway beyond the room in which we were trapped.

Others had been brave, or foolish, and attempted to escape. Most had been beaten back by the flames and had retreated back into the room in which we were all standing when the alarm was raised. The others had tried to escape and were consumed by smoke and flames.

So why were we here, my wife and I?

The plan had been thus: in order to reawaken and vivify the diminished physical lust Iris and I had once held towards one another, we would embark on a journey of open experiences. For the last portion of my marriage to Iris I had been emotionally disembodied. The sun had set on my emotional coherence and sex had become a

distant, mechanical form of embarrassment. It soon abandoned us and left us grazing on our own separate pastures of inadequacy.

Literature became the focal point of our communication, and at bedtime we would discuss the books we were both reading as a substitute for having sex.

Iris and her love of thrillers. How she would regale me with the daring and dangerous plots of her crime pulp. Twisted detectives and femme fatales; shallow graves and murderous lunatics hell-bent on revenge. Iris would gesticulate with those frantic little hands, her face pink and glossy from cleansers and creams applied liberally before bedtime, as she filled me in on the latest plot developments.

At dinner one day, Iris decided to change the course of our shared existence.

“I want you to do something for me; for us”.

Those were her words, as she gazed at me across the kitchen table.

“And what might that be?”

I tried not to sound cynical, disinterested or patronising, so I just sounded flat or non-plussed, which caused Iris to raise her eyebrows and dart a wounded bird-look at me. There are awful moments in a marriage when you know you are being a tosser and so does your wife. And a dreadful minute passes by in which both of you quietly meditate on the effect that your cruel and unreasonable comments and criticisms have on your entwined lives, more so hers.

And I’m not even an awful husband. I’m stupid, oblivious and myopic to my wife’s needs, but I’m not awful. God knows what women with awful husbands must endure.

Iris, after staring into a corner with her hand at her throat, came to and filled her glass generously with the Cabernet Sauvignon I had brought home that evening.

Locking her gaze with mine, she allowed me to see the weight of what she was about to propose in her glazed, probing eyes. I knew immediately that whatever she said next to further illustrate what the “thing” was, would prove that she had gone beyond a casual moment of conception, and her eyes were the warning beacon.

“I want you to have sex with another woman”.

And there it was; delivered with stern simplicity. Those eyes bore into me with a new intensity and purpose I had never before experienced.

My mouth burst forth words before my brain had even begun to process and piece together the many fragments of my shock:

“Dear God, Iris! What the hell are you talking about?”

“You *know*. You know!”

I did know.

And so it was arranged that I would indeed have sex with another woman. And Iris would enjoy the pleasures of a sexual experience with another man.

There were some terms and conditions - excuse the dreadful, inappropriate parlance – to these experiences of passion with persons outside of our marriage. The primary term was that the person I would choose to sleep with had to remain anonymous to Iris. The same applied to the person she would select.

Secondary terms included: taking every precaution necessary to minimise the risk of ‘unwanted ramifications’, ensuring the person with whom the act was to be performed was fully aware of the incongruous wider situation and remaining entirely truthful to the reasons and motivations behind why we were embarking on the bizarre, base experiment in the first place.

As the days wore on, Iris treated the project with an air of schoolgirl like excitement. One evening, as I stirred at a rubbery risotto, I always was lousy at this bloody dish and my reasons for attempting to make it time and again only to produce this pale glue always escaped me, I watched Iris chew on the end of her fountain pen. She was pensive, eager and absorbed as she made notes at the kitchen table. God knows how many times she had rewritten those bloody T&Cs. My gut instinct led me to believe my wife had been plotting this project for some time. My gut instinct also told me that she had selected her mate.

Suddenly I was pulled from my mental meanderings by the awful smell of risotto rice sticking and burning against the pan. “Shit!” I pulled the pan away from the hob and stared at the ruined mush.

I turned to Iris and declared flatly:

“We need to talk”.

My suspicions were not unfounded. Iris has chosen her mate. He was a member of faculty at the drama school where she worked as a secretary. His name was Stephen. He was a single, black, friendly, confident 36 year old guy who was popular among the staff and “great with the kids”. And above all else, he had agreed to partake in an evening of intimacy with my wife.

“He’s offered to cook me dinner at his flat in Tufnell Park” Iris confirmed, as though it were the most ordinary, pedestrian snippet of information she could deliver.

“How kind of him” I spat, feeling my blood pressure rise.

“Well, we could have opted for a grotty hotel on Seven Sisters Road, but we wanted to make it...special”.

“Special? This is supposed to be a one-off fuck with a random bloke to overcome your weird, paranoid neurosis!”

I was yelling. I had never yelled at Iris with such venom, such fury.

She was shocked, scared even. As she looked at me with a mixture of contempt and fear I felt frozen, stuck, lost for words. Something inside me wanted to reach out to Iris, to take her into my arms and tell her I loved her.

Instead, I turned of my heel and stormed out of the flat.

I was on my fifth pint of strong lager.

It was a Tuesday evening in the musky pub, and business was slow. Aside from a few lonely old boys hunched over their pints of bitter, the place was empty. I felt wretched, sat there in my shirt and tie; I hadn’t even changed since returning home from work, losing my mind, screaming at my wife, and raging out of my flat.

Iris, I let you down. I allowed my interest to wane, I took my eye off the ball and I fucked up. Fuck you, all the same. Fuck you and fuck Stephen. Damn.

I finished my pint and felt the room start to dance. Fresh air, now!

Stumbling out of the pub I found myself leaning against a wall on Highbury Barn. Where now? Then the idea hit me. It was a God awful idea, vile and impulsive. But the five pints of strong lager helped me suppress my doubts and misgivings. I made my way to Lordship Park, swaying drunkenly towards where the Ladies of the Night were working the streets.

“Let’s have sex”.

It was the way she said it; like there was no gravitas in the delivery of the statement. The instruction came out of her mouth with all the weightlessness of a mild and regular suggestion, like: “let’s have tea”.

The words filled the weird space between our two faces. Her face was a picture of calm focus with a slight sub-layer of mischief or calculation. Mine was a frowning puzzle of blushed, drunk self-consciousness.

It was an absurd turn of events. One moment you're placed in a certain way; arranged in a certain fashion. The next you're in an entirely different place and reality has altered. She had an air of formality about her when I first made my approach. Despite my garrulous state, I still took note of how she refused to make eye contact, and looked about with caution and a stern awareness.

It wasn't until she led me through a narrow hallway with a brown, filthy carpet and an exposed light bulb that glowed dimly, that her persona changed, and she linked her fingers between mine, her left hand locked like a hinge with my right hand.

She unlocked a battered door, and we entered a small, stuffy bed-sit. It smelled of unwashed underwear, talc and mouldy milk.

Still holding my hand, she slumped onto a mattress in the corner, pulling my useless bulk down onto her.

At what stage could I begin to define this as an act of betrayal? When we inevitably pressed our lips together?

This was an act of betrayal on a scale I was measuring with palpable physicality. My body was knotting itself with a mixture of preemptive regret and incendiary desire. And then we were kissing. Awkwardly, like two people pushing against nature's will. Kissing isn't supposed to be acted out, like a purposeful movement in a chain of movements all leading to something decisive and forced. Kissing is supposed to be impulsive, natural, unplanned.

As she kissed and knawed at my neck, I opened my eyes to take in the room. It resembled a prison cell. Despite the numerous posters and dog eared photographs, bordered by the odd section of faded floral wallpaper that held miserably to the walls, there was a feeling of a dirty and forgotten life ebbing away.

She couldn't have been any older than eighteen. I had pulled my wallet out in front of her, without muttering a word, and pulled three twenty pound notes out, holding them up by way of a proposition. She needed no further explanation or encouragement. Her business like handling of the transaction was to grasp my hand and pull me, stumbling, into this terrible place.

And now she was unbuttoning the fly on my trousers and saying those terrible words: "let's have sex". She had an accent. Polish? Russian? Impossible to gauge, especially in my drunk state and because those were the only words the girl and I were to exchange. I was more shocked by the knowing assurance with which she tackled the zip, than the fact that she was indeed pulling open my jeans and reaching in to grope for my cock. She was no stranger to the geography of a man's groin.

Her tongue was like a hungry snake; lapping in to jab forcefully into my mouth, then retreating to poise itself and assume a new angle of entry. It jabbed and encircled my mouth and tongue with a weird, greedy angst.

I had to find a way to disconnect from my mental meanderings. If I was going to do this, it had to be a fully involved, wholly enjoyed experience. Otherwise what's the point? She had my cock in her hand now, and was thrusting it eagerly. Meanwhile I hadn't so much as touched her. The tension of my train of thought was pulling me in all directions, separating me from the physical vessel that was engaged in an act of impromptu, impulsive and utterly repulsive sexual gratification.

Somehow, I found the off switch to the pulse of my thoughts.

I laid back and let her do her work.

And so my sexual encounter with another woman had come to pass.

I remembered only fragments of the experience, and felt confused and slightly sickened at the way I had allowed myself do such a thing. Riding on the guilt of this act, I took a much more accepting and passive approach to Iris's plans.

She was convinced I had "come around" to the idea, because I "knew how much it meant" to her. That was nonsense, of course. I felt annoyed and exhausted by the "project", and just wanted shot of the whole thing. I also felt strangely jealous that my side of the project had been so bloody sordid and hers was set to be so intimate and fulfilling.

On the evening of her night with Stephen, I sat alone in the flat with the television on and an empty feeling of dread and uncertainty filling my entire being. I took two strong sleeping tablets and collapsed like a corpse across an armchair for many long, unconscious hours.

After her evening spent with Stephen, Iris was a woman transformed; energetic, self assured and incredibly attractive. Prior to the project she was impervious to

compliments. If someone, myself in particular, were to pay her a compliment she would blush, look away and dismiss the flattery with some self decrementing comment. Now, when people remarked on how well she looked, she would smile and say a self congratulating "thank you, I feel fantastic!"

I was in a constant state of irritation. I would grimace every time Iris smiled to herself as she recalled a moment of passion she had enjoyed with Stephen. I lay awake at night, my thoughts compounding together to taunt me and mock my failures as a man. I took to taking sleeping pills every evening; collapsing in the same armchair with a glass of wine in hand.

Most mornings I would wake, sticky mouthed, on that same armchair, covered by one of Iris's knitted blankets that she had pitifully thrown over me before heading to bed.

I blamed a hectic schedule at the office and a heavy work load for my constant misery and inertia. Iris chose to believe this, though she was entirely conscious of my fading state. I was counting the costs of the project while she was flourishing. The disparity in our resulting situations meant we were no longer a unit, no longer a partnership.

One evening, when we sat down to dinner, Iris made a new proposition.

"Darling, I want you to do something for us".

"Christ. What?"

"Well, there's this...event. It sounds like great fun. Really friendly and welcoming for people like us"

"People like us? What are you talking about?"

"Well, look how much we enjoyed... you know. Any way, this is an event for people, couples, to come together and...enjoy getting to know each other. It's an opportunity for us to meet other people and..."

"Iris, is this what I think it is? You're proposing we go to a Swingers party?"

Iris began to prod and probe nervously against the skin on her chest with one hand, while reaching across the table to hold my hand with the other.

"I'd really appreciate it if you did this for me", she said, in an almost condescending tone.

"Counter proposal, Iris: we drop this whole "screwing other people" debacle and start, I don't know, trying to screw each other?" I said this weakly, as though it was the most unlikely, absurd suggestion I could have made. Iris smiled and shook her head and, as if she hadn't heard a word I had said, repeated:

"I'd really appreciate it if you could do this for me".

And that's why we were there, in that doomed building.

As the location where the Swingers party was held slowly burnt to the ground with us trapped inside, the sound of sirens outside could be heard. No good, I thought, we're on the sixth bloody floor.

The flames had crept into the room, and the smoke had overwhelmed us entirely. I hadn't put up any form of a fight, in fact I almost gave myself over to the affront of heat and death and panic. People were pulling themselves towards the corners of the room; trying to find the last vestiges of safety, trying to prolong their final moments. Others, the brave ones, had attempted to break windows using chairs only to find they were reinforced and impossible to break through. One man, strong willed and desperate, was still pounding a chair against the glass, though his efforts were blighted by his dying body caving in under the smoke and heat. The chair bounced back towards him feebly. After one last attempt he succumbed to the smoke and collapsed.

Iris had gone limp in my arms as her lungs had been defeated by the invasion of deadly fumes. I fell back onto a sofa coughing and losing consciousness.

I pulled Iris against me, and waited.